The Notion of Racial Degeneration in France and Britain before the First World War

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Looking back on the period around the turn of the century in France and Great Britain the modern reader is inevitably struck by the supreme arrogance, the consummate self-sufficiency which so typified the leading exponents of national values and which we tend to identify, by implication, with most people of this time. In a manner which not even the Le Pens of our age would care to match in public, declarations extolling the intrinsic superiority of the race were hurled down from platform and pulpit as the undisputed, indeed indisputable, self-evident facts of life.

Foreigners could only protest aghast at the way they were treated by Englishmen.[3] By long tradition, it had generally come to be assumed, that:

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[3] The term "foreigner" tended to be a very elastic one during this period. In its broadest sense, it quite simply designated anyone who was not English. The Irish dimension to this contempt is well documented but what is perhaps less well known is the extent to which Scots and Welsh people resented such English arrogance which inspired the future Prime Minister Lloyd George to complain bitterly around the turn of the century that they were being treated like "the niggers of the Saxon household" (Jalland 759).

> In the eyes of the Englishman the Frenchman is a dog, the Spaniard a fool, the German a drunkard, the Italian a bandit... Only the Englishman is the *nec plus ultra* of perfection, and Nature's masterpiece (McPhee 90).[1]

Like the young Dutch writer to a popular English magazine at the turn of the century they could but protest at this infuriating attitude of calm superiority to the rest of the world, where "the young Englishman came to believe he was equal to two or more Frenchmen, about four Germans, an indefinite number of Russians, and any quantity 'you care to mention of the remaining scum of the earth" (Leeson 99).

The world was an Englishman's oyster, as the popular song of the time put it, where even leading statesmen of the stature of Benjamin Dorsally felt free to boast without fear of contradiction, that the universality of the *Rights of Man* there was necessarily superseded by the *Rights of Englishman* (Plumyène 21). It is easy to see how a certain feeling of effortless superiority, a consciousness of unassailable primacy could dominate social thinking when people could boast that they belonged to the greatest Empire that mankind had ever known embracing fully one quarter of the world's population, an Empire on which the sun never set (or never rose, as the case may be) (Bédaria 203).[2] Little wonder that the *pukka sahibs* of that time were intimately convinced that "Niggers begin at Calais."

In the racial hierarchy of mankind, the Englishman stood supreme, for as George Bernard Shaw remarked, by popular conviction was not God himself an Englishman (Morris 11)?

Unless, of course, he was French, for on this side of the Channel, too, such blind belief in the natural superiority of the nation was frequently asserted with equal equanimity. The French, it was stated, had so often claimed that they were the most civilised nation in the world that, in the end, they assumed that this would be taken as undisputed fact by all and sundry. France had a God-given duty towards humanity, a role apart, stemming from its superior intellect and unique grasp of the meaning of life:

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[1] Prime Minister Asquith, in the crisis leading up to the outbreak of war in 1914, found his analysis of the situation hinging on his belief that "the Austrians are quite the stupidest people in Europe (as the Italians are the most perfidious)..." (quoted by Jenkins 324).

[2] A popular retort at the turn of the century to this jibe was that "God wouldn't trust an Englishman in the dark."

> Entre toutes les nations, la France y semble prédestinée. . . . elle a, plus largement que toute autre, enrichi le patrimoine de l'humanité. . . . Elle a de son rôle humain une conception si haute, sa mission s'impose à elle d'une façon si claire, si impérieuse, qu'elle y voit moins l'oeuvre de son propre génie que l'expression des lois éternelles. La conception française, c'est l'éternel humain (Clémentel 120).

Here too, frustrated foreign observers could only protest at the suffocating arrogance which the whole concept generated and the blatantly condescending attitude towards what was visibly seen as the inferior remnants of humanity. Jules Ferry, the founder of the modern French educational system, had stated the premise that "il y a pour les races supérieures un droit parce qu'il y a un devoir pour elles . . . Elles ont le devoir de civiliser les races inférieures" [1] and it takes no great feat of genius to guess where France was to be situated inside this equation, for the destiny of French thought was to clarify the thoughts of other nations (Herriot 303).[2] So oppressive did this sentiment of racial mysticism and moral imperialism become during the IIIrd Republic that one German specialist of French culture was moved to write a book whose title went straight to the heart of the question: *Dieu est-il français ?* Friedrich Sieburg, in an attempt at retracing this strain of mysticism through the course of French history, noted: " [La Pucelle] avait pour principe que non seulement la France a toujours raison, mais encore que la France est toujours d'accord avec Dieu: de sorte que quiconque lui résiste, résiste à Dieu lui-même...", before concluding ominously: "Et voilà pourquoi il est si difficile de vivre en paix avec la France" (Sieburg 33).

It would be tempting for us simply to dismiss such excesses as minor historical anecdotes, the extravagant and somewhat childish self-indulgence of an emblematic age, an irrelevant cocktail of racist bluster and metaphysical escapism. Yet to do so would be to misinterpret its meaning by reference to our own age. To call these views *racist* is not to indulge in present-day political jargon but to recognise and highlight their essentially descriptive nature. Ideas

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[1] Jules Ferry, *Journal des Débats Parlementaires*. 28th July 1885. Péguy after 1905, of course, was even more eloquent and categorical in his conviction that "la France était de toute antiquité, par droit de naissance, par droit divin, comme une reine des nations (87).

[2] Quoted by Jean-Thomas Nordmann. *La France Radicale* (Paris : Gallimard/Julliard, 1977), 58. Such sentiments were by no means limited to the hard-right. The young Jean Jaurès could claim in 1884 that the work of colonisation undertaken by France was, "une oeuvre d'humanité et de progrès." Jean Jaurès. "Discours pour l'Alliance française," Albi, 1884. This sentiment was shared almost word for word by Léon Blum in a speech before Parliament on 9th July 1925 (cf. Benoist 210-11).

such as these were, quite simply, taken at face value, as scientific certainties, the straight-forward factual account of the world which saw mankind as designated and ordered into degrees of superiority or inferiority by the accident of race, thus encouraging such affirmations as Disraeli's famous statement: "All is race: there is no other truth." [1]

Like the self-made man who worshipped his creator, as contemporary wisdom would have it, both countries went to great lengths to indulge such beliefs. Glorying in the name of Britain or France became one of the most popular past-times of the era and one of its most abiding images. The sudden upsurge in ostentatious exhibitionism in public works[2] and other spectacular manifestations of national superiority — The Crystal Palace, the Tour Eiffel, the Universal Expositions of 1889 and 1900, etc. — are quintessential expressions of this period (see Gérard; Cannadine 101-64). Less well documented, but even more influential, was the effervescence visible in the determined forging of grandiose ceremonial and ritual as symbolic proof of the dynamics of State where present greatness was projected as natural outcome of a timeless past. The creation of Bastille Day,[3] the Imperial Assemblage of 1877 where Queen Victoria was proclaimed Empress of India, the Spithead revue to celebrate her Diamond Jubilee in 1897 (Cannadine 131-32 ; Cohn 179-83), and so on, all bear witness to the stress laid on this symbolism.

Yet this pageantry, its pomp and circumstance notwithstanding, was no more than the visible manifestations of a national ideology whose roots were being woven in a more methodical and systematic, if less assuming, fashion, into the collective consciousness of the nation. The credo of national glory, in France as in Great Britain, became, during this period, the major component of the

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1 This idea had become extremely popular during this period through the writings of Robert Knox, a Scottish anatomist, and his work, *The Races of Men,* which, from 1862, carried the revealing sub-title *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Influence of Race over the Destinies of Nations* (London, 1850) (cf. Faber 59).

2 In chapter 10 of *Edwardian Architecture: A Handbook to Building Design in Britain, 1890-1914* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1977). Alistair Service gives a vivid description of this feverish activity which sought to make London the worthy capital city of the richest nation in the world. Yet this does not even begin to take into account the proliferation of monuments and commemorative statues which are still very much in evidence in all of the major towns of the country even to this day. For France, see for instance Agulhon's *Marianne au pouvoir : l'imagerie et la symbolique républicaines de 1880 à 1914.*

3 In particular see the chapter XI "Mythes et Commémorations." in Claude Quétel's *La Bastille. Histoire vraie d'une prison légendaire* (382-420). A reconstruction of the prison was made for the Universal Exposition of 1889 and it apparently attracted huge numbers of spectators.

binding process, spreading in a non-polemical way through all the agencies of the homogenous state: "The literature of childhood, the lessons in school, the press of adult life all contributed to a powerful cultivation of an imperial mood . . . [where] it was difficult for people to resist or remain impervious to this climate" (Walvin 115-16).[1]

And yet for all this self-assurance, for all the strident bluster and conviction and the undoubted popularity of such views, we must not forget the extent to which they co-existed with deeply-felt disquiet about the national environment and accumulating doubts about the deterioration of the race. Once again we are faced with the startling paradoxes of this age, that at the very time when British and French imperialism sought to lay waste to the cultures of other peoples, to subjugate and relegate native civilisations to their own conquering values, disquieting questions about the intrinsic validity and strength of this dominant civilisation were becoming harder and harder to avoid. It is remarkable that this very age which later generations have so consistently portrayed in images of a golden sunset, the end of the garden party, should have been so consistently lived out in terms of fear and anxiety by contemporaries.[2]

No one single factor lies at the heart of this disquiet but rather an apparently disorderly collection of isolated fears which combined to forge this new climate. Nor is it possible to identify a concerted sustained effort to impose such ideas as the dominant view of society but rather they appear effortlessly to float to the surface of the collective consciousness in an uncontrolled fashion in times of stress. In an attempt to capture this atmosphere at the end of the 19th century Philip Hamerton felt moved to write that:

> The present English temper resembles that kind of anxiety which troubles people in private life when their money matters are not satisfactory or they have a painless but incurable disease. The anxiety comes on at odd times, one cannot say when or why . . . The common English people alternate between times of false security and . . . panics, the intelligent English know always that the situation is precarious, and do what they can to remedy it, regretting that they can do so little (Hamerton 418).

While for Frederick Harrison, in 1911,"it is an age of open questions — in theology, in morals, in politics, in economics. All the old foundations and but-

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1 For the identical process in France, see Sorlin, *La société française* 251-53.

2 *The Times* was in no doubt, on 19th January 1909, that contemporary Edwardians "place the golden age behind them, and assume that no generation ever had to deal with evils so great and perplexing as those of the present day."

tresses of our institutions, our beliefs, and our future hopes have begun to sink" (Walvin 161). Daniel Halévy, likewise, in his attempt to analyse French society, was amazed to discover that even contemporaries looking back at the whole of this period leading up to the First World War, seem confused and unable to pierce the obscurity of the times they themselves have lived through: "Ces cinquante, ces soixante années . . . pèsent lourdement sur eux, et cette pesanteur qu'ils sentent est presque tout ce qu'ils savent d'elles" (Halévy 6).[1] Again and again, this disturbing sensation of obscure menace, of ill-defined tensions weighing heavily on society and, especially on the political right, the obsession with the anguish of death are seen as the water-marks of the age (Girardet 17).

Nor is it easy to pinpoint chronologically the sources of this rising anxiety, for as Arthur Koestler once asked: "What does history know about nail biting?" It has been suggested that the rise of new national identities in Europe and above all, the readjustments to the hierarchy of international relations which they demanded and which reached an apex with the defeat of France at the hand of Germany, were the catalysts of this movement which, once openly identified, rapidly fed on a whole host of other considerations and real or imagined fears, to spread and grow (Ensor 333; Digeon 324). That France should have been traumatised by the defeat needs perhaps little explanation. After a *Blizt-Krieg* lasting some four weeks, the greatest military machine in Europe had been humbled into almost total surrender by "the Prussian parvenu," losing, in the subsequent peace treaty 14,870 Km^2 of national territory, 1,628,000 of its population, inflicted with a war debt of five milliards of gold francs to be paid over three years and, above all, disintegrating the internal political stability of the country by opening up deep divisions inside the nation (Marriott and Robertson 366-71; Digeon 1-2 *et passim*).

What is less obvious, however, is the intensity of the shock waves which rippled through the British Establishment and which have tended to be ignored or discounted as the echoes of an irrelevant continental dispute. And yet did not Disraeli sum up the situation in the gravest of tones?

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[1] It is interesting to note that David Thomson in his study of the European dimension of this period concludes along the same lines: "Viewed as a whole, the tendencies of European thought by 1914 revealed the most astonishing contrasts and conflicts. . . . There was . . . a profound disorientation of established beliefs and habits of mind which led to mental and moral bewilderment."

> The German Revolution [is] a greater political event than the French Revolution of the last century... The balance of power has been entirely destroyed, the country which suffers most and feels the effects of this great change most, is England.[1]

To understand why this should be so, we must get beyond the obvious military and diplomatic consequences which the French defeat introduced. That a new power should suddenly emerge from the shadows to annihilate what was generally believed to be the most powerful military machine in Europe was quite simply astounding (Hamerton 77-78). But it was the implications of the defeat and the psychological impact on the minds of contemporaries which was to have the deepest and most far-reaching consequences, setting in motion a train of events and theories which were to dominate the spirits of the time far after the defeat itself had ceased to be militarily or indeed economically important.[2]

In this new climate of insecurity and doubt, public debate increasingly focused attention on the relentless and ever quickening momentum of modern life[3] and the rapidly expanding list of imponderables which this introduced into the equation of a stable world, a factor, no doubt, given greater emotional significance by the ending of the century. The world seemed to be caught up in a spiral of change — the *old* versus the *new* — which no one was able to contain.[4] Externally, the birth of the new countries in Europe, such as the German Empire and Italy, of new world powers like Japan and the U. S. A. no doubt also contributed to the feeling of ageing among the others. Not only did they represent a new element in the delicate equation of the balance of power in the world,

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[1] Speech in the House of Commons, on 9th February 1871 (quoted in Baumgart 48).

[2] Not only was the war debt paid off well before the dateline fixed by the Treaty but, even more interestingly, German calculations that the French army would be incapacitated for some considerable time back-fired. The army quickly shook off the opprobrium of defeat (the incompetence of the High Command was to blame) and even took on the aura of being the saviour of the nation! (see Girardet 192-95).

[3] The artist and wit, J. M. Whistler, summed up this feeling in the early years of the century with the words, "This is an age of rapid results when remedies insist upon their diseases, that science shall triumph and no time be lost" (Whistler 285). An interesting perspective on the obsession with speed can be found in chapter 3, "The popularization of the automobile" by James M. Laux. In *First Gear: The French Automobile Industry to 1914* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1976) 20-34.

[4] Change had become such a credo to modern life, one critic lamented, that "smart" Edwardian society even seemed to have rejected the traditional sense of belonging in favour of a "nomadic existence," rhythmed by the seasons of the year (Hynes 7-8; Digeon 485).

insolently challenging hitherto undisputed prerogatives,[1] but just as importantly they constituted an obvious economic threat to the continuing prosperity of long established positions. Internally, also there were growing fears that the old theories on which the complacency of the period had been founded were no longer capable of responding to the new challenges. Liberalism and *laissez-faire* had not only been found wanting when applied to the crying needs of the time,[2] but like a house of cards the paradigm of civil and spiritual life seemed under threat by its own apparent inability to adapt to the modern world.[3]

Not one problem, then, but a nebulous collection so diffuse as to be equatable with a feeling, a mood of national depression, "a crisis of culture and intellect" (Thomson 409). In the new climate of ever expanding instability and accumulating doubt, public debate increasingly sought reassurance in global explanations of the changing world which neither science nor religion seemed individually able to provide. Since birth and death, rise and fall, expansion and contraction were everywhere visible could not the rules governing the organic world be applied to the inorganic? Since the man-made world seemed to be evolving in the same kind of patterns as the natural environment, should not the same theories be applied to it? Could not the steadily darkening climate of insecurity and pessimism be dispelled by reconciling the great forces of science and metaphysics and applying them jointly to the problems of the day? [4] In attempting to respond affirmatively to such pressure, a new theory gradually

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[1] Feelings similar to those aroused in France at the German audacity in provoking it to war in 1870 are visible on the British side when, within the space of some six months in 1895, first the United States then the tiny Boer population of some 200,000 people (men, women and children) had the audacity to overtly challenge the established might of the British Empire (Tuchman 31-32).

[2] The magnitude of the depression in Britain in the 1880s shook liberalism to its foundations as did the discovery that poverty was not addressable simply by charity and moral education (Stedman Jones 284).

[3] Gustave Le Bon, in particular, believed that the arrival of the age of the crowd was the clearest sign of the decadence of the country, since the values which lay at the heart of society would be trampled out of existence by this new anarchy (Le Bon, *Foules* 14).

[4] The intellectual climate of this time was a curious one where the blind faith in the ability of science to explain all had been steadily eroded and tempered by a growing desire to integrate intuition as a corrective into lifelearning. As Samuel Hynes remarked: "Victorian science may have made metaphysics obsolete, but it had not destroyed men's metaphysical itch, and much of what one might generally call Edwardian science is concerned with the problem of restoring metaphysics to the human world" (Hynes 134).

evolved which was uniquely suited to the mood of the times. It went under the popular title of *Social Darwinism.*

This has been defined as the transfer of Charles Darwin's biological theory of natural selection which contended that the survival of the fittest and the extinction of the weakest was one of the most important causes of evolution in the organic world and of Herbert Spencer's mechanistic theory of the evolution of the universe, to the interpretation of the development of human society (Greta Jones 3-5). Since man descended from the apes, it was argued, the theory of continuing evolution should likewise be applied to society as a whole which was thus seen as a living organism. Given the complexity of modern society, analysis tended to be applied from two distinct but complementary angles, one internal and the other external. Internally it purported to explain the rise and decline of classes inside society while externally it charted the evolution of nations, termed *organic states,* throughout history. Yet, hidden behind the rhetoric of exact science there lay the premises and aspirations of metaphysics, the belief that by applying the calibrations obtained using scientific measurement and quantifiable statistical data, absolute perfection could ultimately be attained: "Whereas evolutionary theory wants to explain the *past* evolution in the organic world, social Darwinism projects the evolutionary idea on to the *future* development of mankind" (Baumgart 82).

As such, it proposed nothing less than a total explanation of the world, for it was a lens through which all of the major questions and vaguely-felt anxieties could be given meaning and salutary direction. Its appeal thus cut cleanly through the traditional cleavages of politics, hypnotising many and more importantly setting the framework for debate and thinking on the whole question.[1]

Societies dedicated to the spreading of the word were small in membership terms during this period, but they represented immense intellectual quality. That they have remained relatively obscure is due not so much to the theories they advanced as to the huge variety of conclusions that these were claimed to lead to as well, no doubt, as their inherent vulnerability to what was euphemisti-

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[1] The ease with which social Darwinism can be equated with conservative, anti-democratic thought must not blind us to its popularity among British Liberals and even on the left. Walter Bagehot, for instance, was a committed disciple of this theory as was L. T. Hobhouse and John Maynard Keynes. Among the various socialist sympathisers can be found the Webbs, Keir Hardie and Ramsay MacDonald, Hyndman and Harold Laski, each from his own perspective and to strengthen the validity of his own conclusions.

cally termed "undesirable types." [1] Among them, perhaps the greatest was Eugenism.

Coined in 1883 by Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin, the term designated "the study of agencies under social control that may improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations either physically or mentally" (Galton 35). After a long period of incubation the idea took concrete shape, when, as a result of a meeting of the *Sociological Society* on 16th May 1904, the Eugenics Records Office was set up. By February of the following year, the movement was on sufficiently solid foundations for a Research Fellowship in Eugenics to be created as an indispensable step to fulfilling the goals of the movement.[2] To many minds, however, this emphasis on pure scientific research was simply not enough. Action was required. In London in November 1907, therefore, a break-away group from the *Moral Education League* set up an alternative movement, the *Eugenics Education Society* whose orientation was much more popular and propagandist. Almost immediately it involved itself in political activities,[3] lobbying public authorities on what it considered a steadily growing list of dangers threatening society.[4] This high profile propaganda allied to a tireless campaign aimed at the well-educated general public quickly gained it a certain notoriety and attracted large numbers of new members to its ranks. A journal, the *Eugenics Review*, followed in 1909,[5] and with branches spreading

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[1] In his presidential address to the society in 1913, Major Darwin warned his members to avoid the movement becoming "the dumping ground for cranks." Eugenics Education Society, *Annual Report, 1912-1913* (London, 1913) 5-6.

[2] In 1907 the movement felt sufficiently credible to rename this office the "Eugenics Laboratory" and this key feature of scientific objectivity was given its consecration in 1911 when a Chair in Eugenics was endowed to the University of London. The article by Faith Schenk and A. S. Parkes. "The Activities of the Eugenics Society," *Eugenics Review*. n° 60, 1968, 142-161, contains a brief historical survey of the movement (Searle, *Eugenics* 10).

[3] A "Parliamentary Committee" was set up by the movement in November 1911 to monitor the work of Parliament (Searle, *Eugenics* 71-72).

[4] The society gave evidence to the Home Office Inebriates Enquiry and the Royal Commission on Divorce. Within a few years of its creation it was sufficiently influential to play a major role in the setting up of the Royal Commission of Enquiry into Syphilis and the implementation of legislation along the lines recommended by the Royal Commission on the Care and Control of the Feeble-Minded which it had to a very large extent orientated in its direction. Cf. the *Eugenics Review*, n° 5, 1913-1914, 1-64, for a presentation of the society's activities during this period.

[5] The *Eugenics Review* was published from London from April 1909 and is still in existence.

steadily to all parts of the country, plans were made for an International Eugenics Conference to be held in London in 1912.[1]

In a real sense the fragmented development of the British movement reflected both the popularity of its ideas and the contradictory nature of the conclusions to which they were able to lead. Racial degeneration seemed to be such an unavoidable fact of life that its analysis had become a moral obligation for large sections of the scientific community as well as a rallying call for the well-minded. The influence of its ideas cannot, therefore, simply be measured in membership numbers, without taking into consideration the social prestige and scientific esteem which a very large proportion of these represented.[2] Its field of research was consequently comprehensive embracing all of the ill-defined factors believed to be at the root of the decline of the British race. Perhaps inevitably, also, given the enormous variety of these themes, the solutions which they seemed to point towards were varied to the point of mutual contradiction. For some, race regeneration could only be achieved by *positive* action, by encouraging the growth of the healthy elements of the species, "by making of as many as possible fit for survival." Schemes hatched to this effect ranged from the largely utopian demands for stirpiculture and the active and determined creation of a caste,[3] to much more modest and practical demands such as "the endowment of mother

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[1] By 1911 the *Eugenics Education Society* had branches in Birmingham, Liverpool, Southampton, Manchester, Glasgow and Belfast among others and by 1914 could boast of well over 1,000 fully paid-up members. Its local links with the universities in each of these places was a major feature of the movement (Searle, *Eugenics* 60).

[2] Among the most prominent figures identified with the movement, can be found clergymen like William R. Inge, Dean of St. Paul's, intellectuals like the philosopher Ferdinand Schiller, medical experts like Alfred Tredgold and Sir Jame Barr, President of the B. M. A. in 1913, journalists like Arnold White and various members of the Darwin family.

[3] Although it was generally believed that public opinion was not yet ready for such schemes various members of the society suggested that a first step in this direction could be achieved on the local branch level by the creation of a "golden book of natural nobility," which would simply be the *Who's Who* of eugenic families in each area. Possibly by way of preparing public opinion for this step, novels based on the idea of eugenic communities began to appear about this time (cf. Searle, *Eugenics* 85-96).

hood," [1] genetic counselling and the delivery of a Marriage Certificate by the State [2] or the linking of salaries to family size (Pearson, *Eugenics* 30).

Negative eugenics, arguably more popular inside the movement and more in harmony with the climate of the times, likewise generated a whole host of schemes. These ranged from the euphemistically worded calls for the extermination of the "unfit" [3] to their sterilisation,[4] the abandonment of social welfare schemes and other brakes on the natural "culling" process,[5] to the politically more acceptable and more successful campaigns for the segregation of the mentally ill [6] from the rest of society and the adoption of measures designed to stop or control the spread of "foreign contagion." [7]

In France, too, eugenics was a theory which attracted a very large number of doctors and scientists but made little attempt to win over a popular member-

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[1] This slogan, coined by the Webbs, met with a fair degree of support within the movement, (cf. Koeppern 281-83). Some fear, however, was raised that such an approach was not in itself selective enough (cf. W. C. D. and C. D. Whetham, *Family* 201).

[2] (see Ellis, *Social Hygiene* 202-03; Slaughter 153). In France, this theme was to become one of the major campaigns of the movement, resulting in the passing of the 1932 law which made compulsory a medical examination before marriage (cf. Schneider 286).

[3] The Eugenics Education Society did not officially support such a measure, as was the case in other countries, for it recognised how politically unacceptable it appeared, nevertheless, as some of its critics pointed out, this was the logical consequence of much of its arguments and was the extreme solution which made other schemes appear reasonable (Hobhouse 21-22).

[4] This could be done by order of the state (cf. Rentoul 74-76). In its voluntary form, inducements such as subsequent release from incarceration could be proposed as suggested by Havelock Ellis (*Race-Regeneration* 66). The Home Secretary, Winston Churchill was himself favourable to the sterilisation of the "unfit" although he believed that public opinion would be hostile to such a measure (Searle, *Eugenics* 107).

[5] Defective paupers, that is those where pauperism could be seen to run in the family for several generations, were quite obviously being kept alive artificially by state aid. It was therefore suggested that these unfit lives could be terminated *voluntarily* in exchange for Poor Relief (Ellis, *Race-Regeneration* 69).

[6] One of the society's most influential members, Dr Tredgold played a key role in convincing the Royal Commission on the Care and Control of the Feeble-Minded that their growing statistical importance inside the nation would ultimately lead to national disaster if left unchecked (as was the case in 1908). This was why the movement took so active a part in the campaign for the segregation of these "biologically unfit" and the restriction of their freedom to pro-create (cf. Tredgold 721).

[7] (cf. W. C. D. and C. D. Whetham, *Eugenics* 43-44). The impact of the movement's campaign can be seen in the 1905 Aliens Act which, as has been pointed out, was based on a curious mixture of racial and social stereotypes, since it excluded from examination by officials, aliens travelling first-class, made large exceptions for certain categories travelling second-class and permitted entry into the country to those carrying substantial sums of money (Gainer 114-15).

ship as happened in Britain.[1] Yet it would be wrong to conclude that it had little impact on the intellectual climate in the country. Instead, from the 1880s on, it contented itself with reaching the intellectual, scientific and political decision makers[2] through a network of conferences, lectures and free public university course with which it complemented its outpourings of written propaganda.[3] It seems to have been particularly successful in attracting support among the medical and health professions, a trait peculiar to France (Schneider 274). For this reason, perhaps, for a comparatively long time it did not feel the necessity to establish any kind of formal organisation for the movement, preferring rather to rely on the prestige of its leading advocates and in particular that of Georges Vacher de Lapouge.[4] Only after the *First International Eugenics Congress* held in London, from 24 to 30 July 1912 [5] was this step taken when the French eugenics society was founded in the Grand Amphithéâtre de l'École de Médecine at the Sorbonne and here was the home of the society until the First World War. Here it

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[1] The total fee-paying membership before the war fluctuated around 100 (cf. *Eugénique*, Vol. 2, n° 6, 1914).

[2] Among the key figures of the movement were to be found Jacques Bertillon, recognised head of French natalist movement, renowned experts on various medical questions like Adolphe Pinard and Louis Landouzy, dean of the Paris Medical School, and Eugène Apert, president of the French Pediatric society. Other members included two prominent and influential senators, Charles Richet (Nobel Prize winner in Medicine in 1913) and Adolphe Pinard while Lucien March, treasurer of the society from its beginning until his death in 1932 was the head of the *Statistique Générale*.

[3] The themes on which the French members chose to speak at the London Conference largely mirrored the interrogations raised in other countries — the rise of congenital diseases, the fall in the fertility rate, syphilis and alcoholism — and these were completed, during their monthly meetings until the war by discussions of criminal heredity, race degeneration, feeble-mindedness and the link between class and inherited characteristics (*Eugénique*. Vol. 2, n° 1-6).

[4] It is interesting to note that in France, as on the other side of the Channel, there is no clear link between the various currents visible in eugenism and the political parties of the time. Neo-Malthusianism was not exclusively left-wing, nor natalism and eugenism on the right. Georges Vacher de Lapouge, Paul Robin and Adolphe Landry were just some of the socialist militants inside the movement (Dupâquier 485).

[5] This conference saw a very large attendance, forty-four members, from the French Consultative Committee. Indicative also of the prestige of the French movement is the fact that its delegation was the largest of all the foreign ones and all five of the papers read by its delegates were published in the Acts, *Problems in Eugenics. Papers Communicated a the First International Eugenics Congress. London, 24-30 July 1912* (London: Eugenics Education Society, 1912) and *Problems in Eugenics. Volume II. Report of Proceedings of the First International Eugenics Congress. London, 24-30 July 1912,* together with an appendix containing those papers communicated to the Congress not included in Volume 1 (London: Eugenics Education Society, 1913).

held its monthly meetings the results of which were published in its journal *Eugénique*.[1]

Like the British movement, French eugenism tended to be deeply influenced by the dominant pressures weighing on the public mind. Here, unlike in England, the negative effects of the industrial and urban revolutions appeared less urgent than the disquieting fall in the birth rate and the general deterioration of the race which this seemed to imply. Positive action directed to this end therefore became its main preoccupation. Not only did these appear particularly important in the light of the hygienist theories so prevalent at this time, but the stress on explanations as to why the race had been deteriorated and the actions aimed at encouraging the production of stronger, healthier and more desirable elements in society unquestionably struck the vibrant note in the collective consciousness.[2] Such an orientation had another advantage in that it brought them shared affinities with both of the other opposing pressure groups active on this front, the natalists and the neo-malthusians. The thrust of the movement's argument was simply that the progress of civilisation contained one fatal flaw in that it allowed dysgenics to prosper to the detriment of the race and this trend had to be reversed. Reversing this could be done by encouraging the growth in the number of eugenics, through education,[3] better hygiene (Houssay 26), infant welfare and other practical measures,[4] although other, more spectacular, suggestions were also advanced.[5] Preventive action, directed at curbing the flow of dysgenics, was deemed less pressing, but nevertheless, as in Britain, involved

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[1] The journal *Eugénique. Organe de la société française d'Eugénique* was published from 1913 until 1926.

[2] The movement distinguished itself from other countries by its attachment to Lamarkian notions of biology which maintained that human characteristics were hereditary but could be stimulated by environmental factors. Hence it could be argued that by improving the quality of the present population, future generations would likewise benefit (cf. Vacher de Lapouge 1016-17).

[3] Paul Robin, in particular, played a major part in influencing the anarchist movement in this direction (cf. Maitron 344-45).

[4] Adolphe Pinard in particular was very active in advocating the notion of "infant welfare" and the specific needs of the newly born baby (cf. Crubellier 213-14).

[5] Lapouge's explanation of the low birth rate hinged on an analysis of what he believed was the decline in French ethnic purity. To his mind the intermingling of races had produced a biological confusion where the basic natural urge for heredity, the perpetuation of one's race, no longer had any clear meaning and therefore no vitality. He, therefore, advocated the setting up of various antidotes such as *compulsory sexual service* and the compiling of a *Man-book* along similar lines to the equestrian world's famous *Stud-book*. Socialism, he believed, held hope for the future by its projected radical transformation of man, by its creation of the new man that Marx had called total man (cf. Freund 184).

the same surgical approach. Short term, the list of options advocated included the castration, sterilisation (Hardy 158-64) or even extermination of these undesirable elements.[1] Yet it was the long term solutions which were believed to hold the greatest chances of success for they addressed the defects of modern society which the combined corrosion of industrialisation, urbanisation and democracy had created.[2] For these reasons, their direct influence on the pre-1914 period becomes that much more difficult to quantify.[3]

Behind these formal institutions, however, lay a much more popular literary and propaganda machine which played a major role in orientating public debate and ideas in this direction and setting the climate of the times. Almost like an inventor rediscovering the wheel, self-appointed experts on national degeneration sprang up in both countries latching on to what was, very frequently, well-known information to warn the unsuspecting citizens of impending catastrophe. Symptomatic of such fears, it became fashionable to talk in terms of "decay," "decline and fall," and "decadence," when discussing the state of the nation in Great Britain as in France.[4] In a sudden proliferation of pseudo-scientific works, biological decline became the key to the understanding of a whole host of problems which had dogged society, from the intractable nature of urban destitution [5] to the moral decay visible in the decline in institutional forms of religion;[6]

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1 This was to be done in a humane manner by qualified judge-doctors according to the socialist (Tabouriech 306).

2 For Georges Vacher de Lapouge, these defects of modern life were wide-ranging indeed, embracing military, political, religious, moral, legal, economic, professional and urban factors (cf. Dupâquier 494-95).

3 It is certainly true that several of the leading members of the society were active inside the two extra-parliamentary commissions set up in 1902 and 1912 by the government to look into the whole question of depopulation. Unfortunately these have been qualified as *"bureaux de rêveries"* essentially organised to defuse the rising tide of disquiet (cf. Dupâquier 484, 497).

4 (Digeon 352-54). By 1905, one British observer could declare that the process of decay had become an undisputed fact in the eyes of the press and public opinion (Newsholme 292; Hynes 45).

5 Although far from being a negligible problem in France (urban mortality exceeded that of rural areas for every age group in 1891), in particular for authors like J. Bertillon and P. Leroy-Beaulieu, the magnitude of urban decay had reached such proportions in Britain — "the bottomless pit of decaying life," in the words of one observer — that writers like Llewellyn-Smith and Charles Masterman could talk about the creation of a new species of humanity, the "new town type" (Masterman, *Empire*, 7).

6 Gustave Le Bon was but one of many who believed that institutional forms of religion were being steadily replaced by socialism among the French working class and that this would ultimately result in national disaster (Le Bon *Socialisme* II). In Britain the spread of irreligion had reached such magnitude by the end of the century — a religious census organised by the *Daily News* in London during the year 1902-1903 estimated church attenders at under 20%

from the proliferation of chronic diseases and epidemics, falling birth rate, infantile mortality and low life expectancy [1] to the seemingly unstoppable ravages of alcoholism, prostitution and homosexuality;[2] from the growing unruliness of the lower orders of society [3] to the disquieting proportions of foreign, especially Jewish, immigration;[4] from the loss of virility and traditional views of manliness [5] to the truculent nature of the new feminism;[6] from the increasingly vociferous

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of the population — that the Church's mission, as in France, was deemed vital to save the country (cf. Walters v).

[1] It has often been claimed that this was "the golden age of hysteria" (cf. Goldstein 209-10). In Britain it was noted with alarm that insanity had risen by 130% during the period 1872-1909. A Royal Commission on the Care and Control of the Feeble-Minded, which had been set up in the wake of the publication of the Physical Deterioration Report, in September 1904, ominously for some, did not publish its findings until July 1908 (*Eugenics Review*, n° 1, 1909-1910, 143).

[2] In France as in Britain, many experts had no doubt that these isolated symptoms were linked. For Caleb Saleeby, for example, alcohol was quite simply a "racial poison," while scandals such as the Oscar Wilde trial in 1895, the most spectacular of a whole line of homosexual affairs involving some of the highest dignitaries in the land, only confirmed the extent of such ravages (cf. Pearson *Darwinism*, 23; Corbin 440-52).

[3] In both countries the rise of labour unrest was likewise equated with a form of dementia. A French specialist of venereal diseases, Dr Mauriac, for instance, believed that there was an organic link between the spread of such diseases and the rise of unrest around Paris (Corbin 362-65). The rioting during the 1911 dock strike, likewise, was claimed by one British expert to stem from the effect of excessive amounts of sun-light on the white-man's brain (cf. Findlay 105-18).

[4] (cf. Drumont 1ff; Wilkins 95). In Britain the concept of the corrupting influence on the nation of alien immigration could be linked to another aspect of the equation, the residuum (cf. White 714-27).

[5] Since it was generally believed, as James Fitzjames Stephen claimed that "strength in all its forms is life and manhood . . . to be less strong is to be less of a man," the catastrophe of the Boer war was to many minds the irrefutable proof of British racial degeneration. The Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration, set up in September 1903 ostensibly to reassure the nation in the wake of the "discovery" that 60% of Englishmen were unfit for military service, seems to have had the opposite effect (cf. Wohl 332-33). In France, medical experts, such as Dr Tissié of Bordeaux, were convinced that "la génération présente est née fatiguée," and hence could draw the conclusion of the emasculation of the race (Weber, In Arnaud 13).

[6] The sperm count of our day was, of course, unknown, and women's agitation tended to be seen as a "war against nature" (Harrison 34). In France, the vanity of the new woman was seen as being the source of the problem, her absurd desire to be the equal of man (cf. Labridy-Poncelet, In Arnaud 322).

demands and spreading popularity of cosmopolitan doctrines and internationalism to the manipulation of national affairs through the occult transactions of secret societies.[1] Ostensibly such arguments converged on the same conclusion, that of the degeneration of the race, yet to many of their chief advocates, these largely interchangeable concepts demonstrated that the working-class was biologically inferior to the rest of society and that, through the spread of democracy and its corrupting influence on the differential birth-rate, the real contagion was being allowed to rise from the lower classes to contaminate those above them.[2]

Sinister as this construction undoubtedly could appear on the domestic front, such fears took on a new and even more menacing meaning when placed in the external perspective. A *fin-de-siècle* mood, a feeling of death, the ending of one of the great eras of modern history, was perhaps inevitable [3] yet what was less so was the way such ideas of biological decline gained credence in relation to international affairs. The nation became a living organism whose state of biological health could be measured scientifically and, hence, charted against its "rivals" through several filters. Irrefutable proof of racial decline lay, it was argued, in an analysis of demographic trends where declining vitality, the inability to maintain and consolidate one's place among the great races of the world, could not be camouflaged.[4] By this criterion Britain and to an even greater extent France had not only been unable to match the reproductive prowess of rival nations, the very quality of this reproduction and the source from which it emanated merely served to accentuate this point.

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[1] The newspaper *La Croix* was perhaps the most outspoken in its denunciations of the secret plots aimed at destabilising France and involving international consortiums of Jews and Free-Masons (cf. Sorlin, *La Croix* 65 *et passim*). For Britain, see Colin Holmes, in particular chapter 5.

[2] It was widely believed that the birth-rate differential would result in the gradual disappearance of the middle class within a relatively short time-span. Society would be composed of some 94% of the lower class within a century (cf. Soloway 269-70; Dupâquier 483).

[3] In England, in particular, this feeling of the end of an era was accentuated by the death of the Queen in 1901.

[4] In terms of population alone, the United Kingdom's rose from 26 to 41 million between 1870 and 1900. During the same period the German population shot up from 41 to 56 million. Widespread fear began to surface that Germany could double its population every 23 years while France was in an advanced state of demographic stagnation, rising from some 36 million in 1872 to just under 39 million by 1901. In its simplest form, France, which constituted 17% of the population of Europe in 1789, by 1914 only made up 8.7% of this total (Dupâquier 1-2, 123).

The economy of the country likewise constituted another measurement to be placed in this equation. If economic dynamism and expansion and harmonious industrial relations were signs of a healthy constitution, their true value could only be gauged from an international perspective. Despite the steady economic growth of these years in France disquieting features seemed to dominate popular interpretations. Scandals and corruption on a massive scale seemed to belie the reality of steady growth,[1] while since the start of the 1870s a feeling that the previous harmony of industrial relations had been destroyed for ever, became popular (Bergeron 161-63). The very foundations of the French economy seemed to be in flagrant contradiction with the doctrines of modern business — artisanal craftsmanship and the *culte du petit* seemed irredeemably doomed to failure when placed in competition with the assembly line, scientific management and the big business ethos (cf., for instance, Sombart 136-40). In Britain's case the situation seemed even more critical. In quantitative terms the steady erosion of British economic superiority after 1870 could neither be denied nor satisfactorily explained. Even worse there seemed to be no solution capable of reversing the trend. Whereas in 1850 Britain still produced two-thirds of the world's coal, about half of the iron and cotton and nearly two-thirds of the ironware, whereas in 1870 her export volume exceeded the combined total of her three nearest rivals, by the 1890s she had been transformed into the most sluggish and conservative industrial economy in the world (Hobsbawm 116f, 178).

The political life of both countries, another trustworthy indicator, similarly seemed heavy with foreboding. A generalised feeling of contamination, corruption and unbridled incompetence seemed synonymous with politics.[2] Here too several levels of disquiet are visible and seem to feed mutually off each other. Instead of contributing to the forging of the harmony of the nation, the field of

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[1] Scandals such as the trafficking of national honours by the son-in-law of Jules Grévy, President of the Republic, in 1887 or the Panama Scandal which led to the trial of six ministers in 1895 gave France an unenviable international reputation. In the 1880s a controversial pamphlet by Auguste Chirac entitled *Les Rois de la République*, projected financiers as vampires sucking the life-blood of the Republic, while by 1906, E. Le Tailleur denounced bankers for killing the country by investing abroad (Bergeron 164).

[2] Although not on a par with France, the tarnished image of politics made credible talk of "moral leprosy" . . . "the demoralisation which has threatened at times to turn the British Empire into a more or less shady company concern," as the *Daily Chronicle* put it on 10 November 1898. Scandals abounded during the whole of the period, from the Hooley affair in 1898 to Marconi in 1912 repeatedly exposing a lack of integrity in public life (cf. Searle, *Corruption* 106 *et passim*).

politics seemed to be one of the major sources of division and fragmentation of the national will.[1] How, it was increasingly asked, could a nation's representatives be respected and credible abroad when at home the overall prestige of political life seemed lost for ever for the morality of the market place had substituted the notion of public service by that of self-interest.[2] Thus the sorry litany of scandals, highlighting inefficiency and corruption at the highest levels of power in both countries, not only rocked the very foundations of the state but tarnished its standing in the eyes of the world.

To the popular mind, these otherwise isolated component parts all came together in the big picture of international relations. Here the nation-state was believed to stand in direct opposition to all others. Here the yardstick of international esteem, hence of greatness, seemed to lie in one's ability to orchestrate diplomacy and international relations, to forge alliances and to occupy the centre of the international stage. In this age of imperialism, the scramble for colonies was not simply a question of economics or military strategy. From the 1880s on, the notion of "rivalry" which it engendered, only served to highlight that the quest for international prestige was first and foremost a measure of national vitality. Where previously it could be argued in France: "Périssent les colonies plutôt qu'un principe," now, against a backdrop of deepening internal dissension the fortunes and especially the misfortunes of colonial adventure blended together to form a climate of moroseness which social Darwinism sought to translate into clear language.[3] Vitality and power became thus synonymous with dynamism and action, lack of expansion Jules Ferry explained, in 1885, was the broad road to decadence. Expansion was the only sure sign of greatness or more precisely those nations which did not expand were in fact contracting (Baumgart 71). The race for colonial possessions now became to many minds the race for survival

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[1] The Dreyfus affair, the conflict between Church and State, the fears of impending revolutionary upheaval in 1906 were all believed to stem from the same political source which later was blamed for bringing the United Kingdom "within measurable distance of civil war," as the *Sunday Times* believed in 1914.

[2] The political system which had been installed in France by 1914, has been aptly named, by Robert de Jouvenel. *La république des camarades* (Jouvenel 131-42). Outspoken critics of the British scene, like Hilaire Belloc's *New Witness*, believed that "The real political division is becoming more and more not a division between 'Liberals' and 'Conservatives' or between 'Socialists' and 'Individualists,' but simply between honest and dishonest men" (*New Witness*, 2 April 1914, 681).

[3] During the Fashoda Crisis of 1898, the British Ambassador in Paris tried desperately to communicate the highly critical link between colonial and domestic policy (cf. Brown 99-100).

and the embarrassments in Egypt in 1882, Fashoda in 1898 like the humiliation of the Boer War took on the significance of litmus tests of racial quality. Not surprisingly perhaps, parallels with the decline and fall of the Roman Empire seemed increasingly attractive in both countries.[1] Where, before, the inherent superiority of the British race seemed to be self-evident truth, when as the historian John Seeley put it in 1883, in his hymn to *The Expansion of England*: "We seem, as it were, to have conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind." [2]

Now, "the white man's burden," was starting to look a bit too heavy for the hero in the eyes of many. Racial decline, the drying up of *élan vital*, the withering away of the nation's sap needed no clearer demonstration.

Yet what of the impact of these ideas and sentiments in real terms, in terms of practical politics? How far can they be said to have influenced the course of history? On the one hand we can appreciate how the deepening awareness of the complexity of modern life and the inter-dependence of the community of nations contributed to the dynamics of international co-operation (Thomson 600). Likewise, the *biologisation* of the nation-state constituted a powerful argument in favour of the growing acceptance of the necessity of social reform (Rosanvallon 171).[3] The spreading popularity of family values and the growing preoccupation with the specific needs of the young found inspiration and justification in these fears[4] and indeed the British Welfare State, it has been argued, stems from this very source (Hay 61).

On the other hand, the negative effects of such theories have also been highlighted by observers. In this new climate of fear and insecurity the national introspection of the times made xenophobia fashionable while contributing to the

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[1] Among the most striking examples of this kind of literature is *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire*, written by Elliott E. Mills in 1905 which sold some 12,000 copies in its first six months. The eight factors of this decline, "are the same causes which brought about the fall of the great Roman Empire..." (22) and are mirrored in France around the same time (cf. Digeon 354-56).

[2] Seeley, (who, like many of the leading historians of this time had little formal training in historical field, being primarily a Latinist) took the established view that history had little to do with the search for objective scientific knowledge and was first and foremost "the school of public feeling and patriotism" (Levine 161). This attitude was in no way limited to England (cf. also Baumgart 50).

[3] As David Thomson has pointed out, the seventeen point reform programme proposed by Georges Clemenceau in 1906 included far-sighted social changes which did not become reality until a generation later (Thomson, *Democracy* 176).

[4] Cf. Chapter "La conscience sociale de la nation" in Rosemary MacKenzie, 69-99.

shifting of the concept of nationalism politically from the left to the right.[1] The proliferation of powerful pressure groups thus became a prominent feature of both countries at this time — groups such as the Primrose League, the short lived but influential Imperial Federation League, the United Empire Trade League and the Imperial Defence Committee, in Britain [2] and the Comité de l'Afrique française, the Union Coloniale française, the Groupe Colonial in France [3] — as a dialectical link was increasingly forged between imperialism and social questions.[4] Such pressure groups, furthermore, were largely responsible for pushing this imperialism of prestige into the forefront of public debate hence obliging governments, as never before, to integrate domestic considerations into the way they handled international affairs. Finally, perhaps, the new vociferous patriotism, highly charged with the rhetoric of *Jingoism* and melancholic longing which became extremely fashionable from the 1880s on, encouraged the glorification of military values among the general public.[5]

Interesting and disquieting as these features undoubtedly were, it is easy to see how they could be considered as little more than a minor historical blip. In this light it is not difficult to appreciate why it is a phenomenon which has received but slight attention from historians and weighs ever so lightly on the historical reconstructions of this time. Questions of social psychology do not withstand the test of time very well, rooted as they are in the subconscious of their own times. Irrational fears likewise are hard for historians to grasp, for they

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[1] This change in the nature of nationalism appears in both countries around the same time. In France Raoul Girardet dates it precisely from 4th July 1892 (Girardet 8). In Britain it has been variously situated in or around 1885 when, as one commentator noted the term took on a new meaning with the adjunction of imperialism and the belief that "love of country" had become "love of more country" (cf. Walvin 114; Baumgart 51).

[2] The Primrose League, the largest and most important of these groups, was founded in honour of Disraeli in 1884, with the aim of propagation of imperialist and conservative principles in foreign and domestic policies. By 1906 it counted some 1.7 m. members.

[3] The role played by geographical societies in this justification of nationalism is often neglected (cf. Becker 36-37; Baumgart 77).

[4] Typical of such ideas was the article published by the *Saturday Review* of 1st February 1896 entitled, "A Biological View of Our Foreign Policy" and which sets forth arguments identical to those found in France in the works of Paul Leroy-Beaulieu.

[5] The term (an old word used by conjurers) suddenly sprang into prominence, in the shape of a music-hall song, amid fears of an imminent outbreak of war in 1878. It has since come to symbolise the rehabilitation of the military, and in particular the simple soldier, in the eyes of the general public and the preparedness of the nation to fight for its rights. From being somewhat rejected by respectable society military personnel was transformed within a short space of time into a topic of popular adulation (cf. Anderson 46-72; Summers 105 and for France, Girardet 279ff, 290).

tend to evaporate without trace or self-justify with hindsight. They also disturb well established thought patterns for they cut across traditional lines of demarcation which our understanding of the tensions of a given period has mapped out and from which we take our bearings. No doubt because of their illusive quality, their frustrating inconsistency, the smallness of the formal institutions which they generated and above all the extreme aberrations which they exposed themselves to during the first half of this century, they offer meagre pickings for historians. No doubt also we are not used to reading the sensitive barometers to subtle shifts in public opinion which lie in the vocabulary through which the banalities of daily life are expressed and the assumptions they feed on.

And yet, the fact remains that the impact of these ideas on the generation of that time, as we have seen, was immense. Indeed, one recent researcher even goes as far as to claim that this was an intellectual trend perhaps more powerful than Socialism and Marxism, that: "[t]here were few who were not spellbound by the teachings of social Darwinism" (Baumgart 83), and that from the nineties on, thinking and arguing in terms of social Darwinism was common amongst practically all the leading politicians and military figures of all the imperialist powers.

To say this, however, is in no way to disqualify the validity of the contradictory pressures and tensions and the fragmentary forces which developed inside the movement. Quite simply increasing doubts of racial degeneration were present in people's world-pictures and coexisted alongside the vociferous chorusing of national superiority. Like two sides of the same coin, both were capable of springing into prominence and with apparent effortlessness capturing the popular imagination then, with equal unpredictability, suddenly subsiding into a latent state. Both possessed that magical quality of being impervious to logic and inviolable by facts alone. They were not the battle but the echo of the battle. As such they were non-polemical and did not themselves form part of the great debate, for most people were unable to comprehend the scientific arguments and theories involved, unable also to validate or disprove the objectivity of the data on which they rested or even place them into perspective. Rather, such ideas tended to be taken for granted as self-evident truths on which the various options for society should be based and analysed. They formed the back-drop to undeclared fears and apprehensions, a spontaneous reflex triggered off by crisis and which could lie dormant below the surface of life at other times. It was all the more dangerous for this.

Finally then the most important and historically the most far-reaching consequence of such ideas is to be situated on this subconscious level, in the growing acceptance, glorification even, of war and the spreading notion of its inevitability. In their inherent inability ultimately to prove the suppositions they advanced, war gradually became regarded as the only true historical reality, the fundamental mechanism of evolution. "There is but one unquestioned and unquestionable superiority in great things — that of a victorious army" (Hamerton 415),[1] wrote Philip Hamerton in 1889, to which the British eugenist Karl Pearson added: "There is no progress without wars." [2] The explosion of August 1914 had left a disquieting feeling in many people's minds. More than at any other time in history the demonstrable catastrophe which modern war constituted for victor and vanquished alike and the apocalypse of suffering and misery which it would bring had been placed within the public consciousness.[3] More than at any other time in the preceding decade of international tensions did the absurdity of the escalation appear both frivolous and grotesque. And yet...

In his book *Verdun*, Jules Romains asserted that World War One was to many people a kind of fatality.[4] For him, as for others it was a tacit choice, made by humanity, between war and revolution.[5] For Labour M. P. George Wardle, editor of the *Railway Review*, it was "a feeling, which I could not help perceiving, that the issue did not rest with us or even with the government. We may protest against the inevitability of this or that as we like, but there are moments when, strive as we may, the feeling of helpless drifting is uppermost..." [6] A feeling which Jean Guéhenno, in his *La Mort des autres*, captures, in the evocative phrase: "le

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[1] For France see Girardet, *La société militaire*, 243ff.

[2] Karl Pearson. *National Life from the Standpoint of Science. An Address delivered at Newcastle, 19 November 1900* (London: A. & C. Black, 1901). For identical sentiment expressed in France, see Becker 27, 43.

[3] Books like Norman Angell's *The Great Illusion* which sold some 2 million copies over the short period from 1910 to 1913 seemed to demonstrate convincingly that war was a thing of the past for it would prove disastrous for all concerned (cf. Weinroth: 1974).

[4] For an identical sentiment of inevitability on the other side of the Channel see Asa Briggs 187; Hobsbawm 193).

[5] For a discussion of the popularity and implications of this belief, see "Guerre ou révolution? L'Internationale et l'Union sacrée en août 1914." In Georges Haupt. *L'historien et le mouvement social* (Paris : F. Maspéro, 1980) 229-235.

[6] *The Railway Review.* 7th August 1914. The *New Statesman* in a Comment on 1st August 1914 also believed that the war "seems to have all the inevitableness of ancient tragedy where persons and events are controlled not by reason, but by the spell of an ironic fate."

1er août 1914, nous sommes simplement tombés dans l'histoire." [1] Put simply, the outbreak of war in August 1914 mingled sentiments of incredulity and inevitability, revulsion and resignation. Perhaps, after all, there is room for a lemming's eye view of the way our civilised forefathers attempted to assume their destinies.

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[1] Quoted by Becker, 269. How tenacious such ideas are on the national subconscious can be seen from the remark made by one of the officers of the French High-Command in June 1940. On the very day that the German armies marched into Paris he was heard to exclaim: "Faut-il croire que l'histoire nous ait trompés ?" (Bloch 21).

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